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Living Through and Living On?

Participatory Humanitarian Architecture in the Jarahieh Refugee Settlement, Lebanon

Riccardo Luca Conti, Joana Dabaj, and Elisa Pascucci

ABSTRACT: In this article, we examine the school project implemented by the architecture charity CatalyticAction in the informal refugee settlement of Jarahieh, in the Bekaa, Lebanon. In doing so, we propose an approach to participatory humanitarian architecture that extends beyond the mere act of designing "together" an "object building." We see participatory architecture as a process that develops incrementally through the socioeconomic life of precarious communities—through what we call the "living through" and "living on" of participation. While remaining attentive to the infrastructural and political limitations to architectural durability in refugee settlements, we foreground the social life of architectural forms, and consider the built environment as not simply "used," but produced and (re)productive through time, beyond, and often in spite of, humanitarian interventions.

KEYWORDS: durability, humanitarian architecture, informal refugee settlement, Lebanon, participation, school, time

In 2015, Save the Children Italy built a pavilion to host an "experiential," interactive exhibition on maternal and child health at the Milan Expo. Once the event was over, the temporary structure was dismantled and transferred to the refugee informal tented settlement (ITS) of Jarahieh, in the municipality of El Marj, West Bekaa, Lebanon. There, thanks to the work of two small Syrian NGOs—Jusoor and Sawa for Development Aid—over three hundred children had attended school for a year in a temporary wooden structure covered in United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) cloths. The Save the Children Italy Expo pavilion replaced the Jarahieh tented school—an interesting case of global humanitarianism "recycling" its infrastructures.

A small architecture charity, CatalyticAction, was behind this unusual operation of transfer, adaptation, and reclaim. The charity had limited funding and managed to secure a pro bono engineering consultancy by the firm Arup. CatalyticAction's work on the Jarahieh school relied mostly on two elements: substantial knowledge of the local context, and the ability to undertake and sustain a flexible and labor-intensive project of participatory architecture, afforded by the organization's small size and capacity to act quickly in a complex environment.

Documenting the CatalyticAction school project and its impact on the Jarahieh settlement, in this article we address the question of durability in participatory humanitarian architecture. Although the charity did introduce a number of internationally acclaimed technical innova-

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tions through the Jarahieh project, CatalyticAction's ethos is not in itself new. As a movement of practitioners striving to alleviate suffering by providing safe and dignified shelter, humanitarian architecture has a decade-long history, involving professionals and NGOs with various backgrounds at a global level (Charlesworth 2014). As expected, the concept of "participatory design" is one of the main sources of ethical and political legitimacy for this movement.

While scholars of development and aid have primarily interrogated participation in its spatial dimensions (Cornwall 2002), in this article we approach it from a temporal perspective. Seen as marked by extreme provisionality and lack of "futurity," refugee settlements have traditionally been excluded from large-scale, long-term development projects. In recent years, however, the recognition of the increasingly protracted nature of displacement has led to a shift in paradigms, resulting in the expansion of development discourses centered around community participation, self-reliance, and sociotechnical innovation to the humanitarian field (Duffield 2018; see also Brun 2016). These changes have also involved refugee aid in Lebanon, where, however, their impact is limited by highly restrictive government policies in the field of shelter provision (see, among others, McKernan 2019).

The project examined in this article moves from an acute awareness of this imposed provisionality, an awareness afforded to CatalyticAction by its character of small-scale, local charity in Lebanon. Building on these premises, we propose an approach to participatory architecture that extends beyond the mere act of designing "together" an "object building" (Awan et al. 2011). We see participatory architecture as a process that develops incrementally through the integration of the built environment into the socioeconomic life of precarious communities—through what we call the "living through" and "living on" of participation. We thus foreground the social life of architectural forms, and the distributed, shared manifestations of "spatial agency" (Awan et al. 2011), through which the built environment is not simply "used," but produced and (re)productive through time, beyond, and often in spite of, humanitarian interventions. However, as we further discuss in the conclusions, we remain attentive to the infrastructural and political limitations to architectural durability in refugee settlements.

After a short introduction on architectures of displacement and refuge in Lebanon, the article examines the process of structural adaptation that the Save the Children Italy pavilion underwent in Jarahieh in order to become a school. Engaging with literature on humanitarian architecture and critiques of participation, we discuss the act of reclaiming and adaptively reusing a structure built for an international exhibition on global aid, working closely with Syrian partners and inscribing it in a dense web of local relations. We then look at the uses of the Jarahieh school beyond schooling, highlighting how the settlement's inhabitants and the Syrian NGOs working in it developed economic activities and planned the provision of social services through and around the structure. We conclude by raising some questions on the relation between participatory humanitarian architecture and time that, we hope, will speak to the experience of the people who have an interest in humanitarian and shelter policies, beyond the architectural "expert" community.

Architectures of Displacement in Lebanon

At the end of 2017, a year after the new Jarahieh school had started its activities, approximately one million Syrian refugees were residing in Lebanon, mostly in conditions of sociolegal, financial, and infrastructural precariousness. A UNHCR study carried out in the same year found that more than half of the refugees surveyed were undocumented, and that 77 percent of Syrian households had experienced lack of food or cash (UNHCR 2017). Children between 3 and 18

years old constitute approximately 54 percent of the Syrian refugee population. It is estimated that nearly 60 percent of them do not attend school (UNHCR 2017).

The inadequacies and contradictions of refugee aid in the country, marked by a lack of coordination between municipal, governmental, and international actors (Boustani et al. 2016), are reflected in the variegated landscape of refugee settlements and sheltering solutions. According to UN Habitat, over 80 percent of Syrians in Lebanon are settled in private apartments and "substandard shelters," including "garages, worksites and unfinished buildings," while the remaining 18 percent live in informal tented settlements like Jarahieh (see Boustani et al. 2016: 21). The government's refusal to establish formal "Syrian camps," coupled with UNHCR's emphasis on market- and innovation-based solutions, has reduced the intervention of humanitarian organizations to the mediation between landlords and tenants, and the promotion of private sector involvement in refugee housing provision—from local letting agencies to international "sharing economy" actors like Airbnb. Projects aimed at structural improvement have faced significant limitations, as local authorities do not allow substantial interventions that would risk making existing settlements "permanent."

In rural municipalities like El Marj, where the CatalyticAction school is located, Syrian refugees live mostly in temporary tented settlements, often built through a combination of shelter kits provided by NGOs (typically wood or tarpaulins) and reused components such as poles, plastic, cardboard, carpets, nylon, and sheets. UNHCR nylon cloths, like those used for the Jarahieh tented school before the CatalyticAction intervention, are found covering the makeshift houses. The shelters have very poor weatherproofing. Where existent, insulation is inefficient and fire-prone, and running costs are very high (CatalyticAction 2017).

This picture of infrastructural and social precariousness, however, does not do complete justice to the complex history of displacement in Lebanon. In a country whose main city, Beirut, "was a refuge for populations fleeing regional wars before it was the capital" and which, between 1860 and the early 2000s, "was built and developed by refugees who brought their labour, their capital, their know-how," the presence of displaced people is far from being simply an exceptional "crisis" (Fawaz 2016: 5). Refugee communities in Lebanon are economically active, and

Figure 1: The CatalyticAction school in the Jarahieh ITS, West Bekaa, Lebanon, 2016. Photograph by Riccardo Luca Conti © CatalyticAction.

often at the forefront of welcoming other refugees, as well as impoverished locals displaced by war, adapting even their most precarious settlements to the new inhabitants (see Ramadan 2008; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2016). As will be shown below, the ethos of the Jarahieh school project sought to harness the social and economic potential of these enduring experiences of coexistence.

Building a School beyond Participation

In the West Bekaa, in 2016, some of the most active NGOs working on refugee protection and basic child education were also Syrian-led. Two of them, Sawa for Development Aid and Jusoor, became essential local partners to the Jarahieh school project. Through their collaboration, the ITS inhabitants were involved in participatory exercises alongside officers from the municipality and local Lebanese residents. As Anna Richter and colleagues (2018: 774) highlight in their reflection on participatory design, the effective involvement of local communities depends on architecture and design "expanding tools and methods of operation." Storytelling, participatory mapping, tactical learning, and dialogical forms of democratic participation thus become essential design methodologies. In Jarahieh, such an expanded toolkit was applied to the adaptation of the Save the Children Italy pavilion. The open-space structure thus became an enclosed and insulated one, to cope with the harsh, snowy winters and extremely hot summers that characterize the agricultural region of the Bekaa. The layout of the pavilion units was reconfigured to include a central courtyard space of 116 square meters, a high external wall, private spaces, and safe access and exit points. The wood panels, which had a decorative function in the Expo pavilion, were reused as bathroom walls, but also as a climbing wall for children's exercise, completed with colorful plastic holds donated by the German organization Südbloc Boulderhalle Berlin. The original iron sheet, also decorative, became a waterproof membrane. In order to be fully adapted to Lebanon's challenging environment, the structure was also provided with seismic anchors. Even the letters that composed the sign "Save the Children" were creatively reused—as didactic tools, but also as bathroom door signs: "He" and "She." The El Marj municipality permitted the school's wastewater to be connected to the local sewage system—an intervention that CatalyticAction managed to secure despite the Lebanese authorities' aversion toward systemic infrastructural enhancement in refugee settlements. These interventions on the structure, designed through participatory research tools, were important to identify the educational and infrastructural needs of parents and children in particular (over 80 children were involved in the school's design).

Like all forms of participatory intervention in development and aid, participatory humanitarian architecture is ridden with discrepancies and asymmetries. The widely discussed power imbalances between those who intervene and plan and those who are invited to participate have traceable colonial histories, and indeed inescapable colonial echoes (Cornwall 2002). These are compounded by the fact that spaces of participatory planning, design, and deliberation often lack durability, limited as they are to the fleeting temporality of events like meetings, focus groups, and workshops (Cornwall 2002). These limitations were reflected in the CatalyticAction project too. In fact, despite the remarkable efforts in the planning and design phases, it was mostly during the material construction process, with the tensions and economic relations associated with it, that an actual socioeconomic space started to develop around the project.

When CatalyticAction started working on the construction of the school in the ITS, building training sessions were offered, and skilled and semiskilled laborers, contractors, and trainees were recruited. Overall, 26 local businesses in El Marj and the surrounding area were involved,

and nearly 30 local youths benefited from the training. Locally sourced materials and local construction know-how were used. In the Jarahieh area, many families build wood and tarp shelters, which they often complement with elements that are available around the settlements. As the CatalyticAction team write in a booklet on the project produced in 2017, the school "is a building of 714 sheep"—more precisely, 714 Awassi sheep, a Middle Eastern indigenous breed that produces wool and hair in the same fleece. Many Syrians in Jarahieh have a rural background and have experience in building mattresses and pillows out of that specific variety of wool. Purchased locally and hand-washed, dried, and sponged by women in the settlement, the Awassi wool—much to the local residents' surprise—was used as insulation material for the school walls. Other local components completed the building process. Green iron sheet was reused from a nearby farm in the Bekaa as a protective rain screen. Green mesh, employed locally for protecting agricultural fields and vegetation from sun, wind, and pests, was used in the walls to hold the Awassi wool vertically. Woven bags used in the region to pack grains hold the insulation material applied to the roof. All these materials have in common their cost-effectiveness and availability on the local market. Although the architects' intervention introduced elements of technical novelty, such as the application of the wool to the walls, their value consisted primarily in their being embedded in local relations, due to their preexisting, varied local uses. Rather than referring to abstract notions of sustainability, the building of the school through reused components thus had the liveliness and socioeconomic embeddedness of a local practice. To be sure, no construction material can be regarded as innocent and entirely benign only by virtue of its local or vernacular character. The relations of exchange and usage that developed around these materials were at times asymmetrical, and even unjust. Nevertheless, the forms of labor, sociality, and infrastructure upgrading that were spurred by the construction process, such as the use of woven bags for insulation, have endured and evolved through time in the ITS. This temporally expanded notion of participation is central to understanding the significance of the school project.

Living Through: Participatory Architecture and Power

Nearly three years after the construction was completed, the school is working at full capacity, sustained by the work of the Syrian teachers and program managers employed by the NGO Jusoor. The school runs two daily shifts. In the morning, between 8:00 am and 11:20 am, it is attended by children from the Jarahieh ITS. The afternoon, between 11:40 am and 3:00 pm, is reserved for children from seven other refugee settlements in the El Marj area, who commute via a bus made available by Jusoor.

Perhaps, however, the most interesting aspect of the project's impact lies in its uses "beyond schooling." It is not unusual for schools to become spaces of shelter in displacement contexts (see, among others, Al Sabahi and Motahar 2017). Particularly in poor and middle-income countries, state- and NGO-managed schools are more likely to meet minimum standards of safety and security than other temporarily available shelters. With its seismic anchors and insulation system in a settlement where many of the living spaces do not meet basic humanitarian standards, the Jarahieh school is no exception. In case of natural events such as earthquakes and snowstorms, the building could fit two hundred emergency beds—it effectively doubles as an emergency shelter. Moreover, as of 2017, four different NGOs used the space for outreach programs targeting the ITS inhabitants, with two sessions per week devoted to water sanitation and hygiene (WASH) training programs. The CatalyticAction architects (2017) also remark how the school has become "a landmark and attraction point in the informal settlement of Jarahieh," but

also "a catalyst for the development of new economic activities." In October 2016, a few months after the construction was completed, small stacks were sprawling in the school surroundings, where street vendors—mostly young, including many women—were selling clothes, chips, telephone covers, chocolate, soaps, biscuits, sodas, and juices. Residents with better financial resources had also set up bigger shops. In 2017, CatalyticAction counted one street seller and three grocery stores operating on a stable basis near the school.

All too often, humanitarian accounts of vulnerability ignore refugees' agency and autonomous experiences of fruitful coexistence. In other cases, social conflicts and political struggles are silenced through a pacified rhetoric of the "social" (Richter et al. 2018) or "community" (see Bulley 2014). The tendency to focus exclusively on the affirmative side of local and community engagement is shared by humanitarians and participatory designers. As Richter and colleagues (2018: 775) argue, participatory design can easily lose sight of the fact that "every community is embedded within the structural components of social orders," and often structured around power inequalities and discursive and material injustices. Paradoxically, the promotion of inclusion through architecture and planning thus ends up making injustices invisible, further marginalizing those who were structurally excluded (Miraftab 2004; see also Richter et al. 2018).

In the case of schools that are used for sheltering and service provision purposes in displacement, conflicts can erupt between hosting societies and refugees, as well as within displaced communities themselves. The dual function that schools acquire can cause disruptions and concerns among specific sectors of local societies (Al Sabahi and Motahar 2017). In Jarahieh, where the school was originally planned and built as a versatile space, these issues have so far been avoided.

Nevertheless, as other aid and development projects in the settlement, the Jarahieh school swiftly became part of a local micro-economy. Contractors and locally recruited NGO staff in the Bekaa found themselves competing in a small-scale humanitarian market, and occasional conflicts occurred over the distribution of resources and jobs generated by the project within the settlement. As it engaged people in the settlement, and brought in skill sets from the Lebanese community, the participatory process unveiled local inequalities and power relations. These are often accentuated in traditional relief provision and short-term development projects in the area, during which big humanitarian agencies recruit, through the local municipalities, "workers from the settlement" without any necessary skill set for tasks such as cleaning the dust off the streets. In such projects, it is usually the most powerful in the ITS who get the jobs. Spending months in the Jarahieh settlement and investing significant resources in the fair recruitment and training of local workforce, CatalyticAction found itself negotiating and at times unsettling these established dynamics.

Although precarious, imbued with power imbalances, and susceptible of generating and increasing inequalities, we argue, the small-scale economies that developed around the school are one of the most significant developments in Jarahieh. This is because they highlight the inevitable embeddedness of humanitarian architecture—like any architecture—in relations of exchange, labor, and reproduction. The relative autonomy of these relations from NGOs' intervention show how participatory humanitarian architecture is enmeshed in dynamics that exceed humanitarian governance in both space and time (Bulley 2014; Schneider and Till 2009).

Living On: The Politics of Endurance in Humanitarian Architecture

Through the Jarahieh school project, CatalyticAction achieved international acclaim, culminating in the award of one of the Lafarge-Holcim Foundation prizes for the Middle East and Africa

in September 2017 in Nairobi. The charity is currently working on the scalability of some of the techniques used in Jarahieh, particularly the use of sheep wool insulation, which it has since then implemented in a child-friendly space built in cooperation with War Child Holland in Tal Abbas, Akkar.

These remarkable successes, however, also raise a number of questions. For a participatory and sustainable architecture project like the Jarahieh school, the main risk is that of "turning into a 'happy island' surrounded by political violence" (Petti 2013: 7). As discussed at the beginning of this article, for Syrians in Lebanon such violence is not only embedded in the experience of forced displacement. It also manifests itself through the slow, pervasive, incremental insecurity of existence in conditions of prolonged infrastructural precariousness—often materializing in the fragile, fire-prone walls of their temporary shelters, or in intervention by the authorities aimed at destroying more permanent-looking forms of refugee housing (McKernan 2019). What can the colorful, eco-friendly primary school built by a charity achieve in this context? Has the Jarahieh school actually succeeded in avoiding the plight of "design parachuting" (Charlesworth 2014) and participatory "tokenism"? Or will it remain an island of progressive architectural practice in a bleak landscape of governmental and humanitarian neglect?

In this article, we have suggested that possible answers to these difficult questions should be looked for in what we call the "living through" and "living on" of participation. As Andrea Cornwall (2002) and Joanna Saad-Sulonen and colleagues (2018) highlight, one of the main issues with participation is time. The Jarahieh school's impact, we have argued, is thus linked to the ethical, political, and sociotechnical challenge of sustaining architecture as a continuous process. This requires a long-term, processual approach "where the customary boundaries between design, use, implementation, maintenance, redesign, and repair become blurred" (Saad-Sulonen et al. 2018: 9). Participatory humanitarian architecture, we propose, needs to transition from time-limited projects on reified "object buildings" (Awan et al. 2011) to durable, holistic processes that involve a variety of actors with diverse, and often conflicting, interests and social positions.

As already remarked, dynamics of coexistence that exceed and challenge the boundaries of institutionalized participation, such as the street vendors surrounding the Jarahieh school, are often regarded as controversial within humanitarian spaces (Bulley 2014). Departing from this view, in its reports CatalyticAction rightly highlights the potentialities of these phenomena. Actual participation, the charity contends, cannot but move from a conceptualization of community that accommodates autonomy and sociality, pushing the boundaries of institutionalized humanitarianism. In this regard, the main question that the Jarahieh project raises is whether mainstream humanitarian institutions and policies are compatible with long-term, socially embedded approaches to architecture. From a technical point of view, humanitarian bureaucracies and logistics are often incompatible with the implementation and scalability of locally produced, adaptable shelter models (Mubarak and Hafeez 2017). Thoroughly participatory design and building processes are achievable for a young, flexible charity collaborating with relatively small local NGOs, as in the case examined in this article. However, they may be hardly feasible for larger, more bureaucratized, and less flexible humanitarian agencies.

In conclusion, it is important to remark how, in places like Jarahieh, issues specific to the governance of refuge and refugee shelter compound the temporal challenges of participatory humanitarian architecture. Although confronted with empirical evidence of its increasingly enduring character, states and the international humanitarian order normatively frame the refugee condition as temporary. This temporariness inevitably entails limits to the impact of participatory architecture. How long will the small commercial activities that flourished around the Jarahieh school last? Can they ever become more than just spin-off humanitarian

micro-economies? What are the risks of turning "endurance" into humanitarian organizations' and architecture charities' main purpose, simply helping people to "live on" and cope with circumstances that they cannot change (Feldman 2015)? The sense of precarity that animates these questions can only be addressed by considering the urban, rural, and camp geopolitics of displacement in Lebanon and the wider Middle East (Rokem et al. 2017), as well as the global inequalities produced and reinforced by border, mobility, and settlement regimes. Even a small and overall successful project like the CatalyticAction Jarahieh school reminds us that real participation of refugees and their allies in imagining, constructing, and living the built environment can never be disentangled from enduring struggles for justice.

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